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Vivaldi soloists a perfect balance

MUSIC REVIEW

By John Zeugner Telegram & Gazette REVIEWER

WORCESTER— On Friday night, in the Sanctuary of the First Unitarian Church, the Worcester Chamber Music Society provided a perfect antidote to our usual encounters with the music of Antonio Vivaldi: Think background fluff in, for example, dental offices or faux pecan-sheathed elevators, or, worse yet, recall that tacky 1981 Alan Alda film, “The Four Seasons.” Anyway, WCMS explored the full reaches of Vivaldi’s genius, well beyond the saccharine glimpses we’re used to. And in doing so, WCMS showcased the remarkable soloists who compose that group.

Thus cellist Michal Palzewicz adroitly and with lush tones handled Vivaldi’s Concerto for Cello and Strings, RV 401, achieving in the adagio second movement a lovely suave interaction with Ian Watson’s delicate, understated harpsichord accompaniment. The second piece, Vivaldi’s Concerto for Flute and Strings “il gardellino,” RV 428, featured WCMS’ executive director, flutist Tracy Kraus, who seemed to ignite audience enthusiasm with a dazzling, almost smokin’ final allegro movement.

Palzewicz was joined by Peter Sulski and guest artist, the renowned Mela Tenenbaum, for Vivaldi’s Concerto for Two Violins and Cello from his well-known “L’Estro Armonico,” RV 565. It’s surely a sign of the professional confidence and competence of WCMS that members of the group, so early in their collective life, could absorb an artist of Tenenbaum’s unique gifts. The Chernobyl disaster caused Tenenbaum to bring her family to Brooklyn, N.Y.; her very Russian approach to baroque music was quickly recognized. She has more than 30 CDs, mostly on the ESS.A.Y. label. And she seems to share with Vivaldi a red-haired approach to his melodic drive and line. There was rich, nifty delineation of the little fugue in the opening allegro.

After the intermission, the next two pieces clearly made up the summit of the evening’s achievements. Vivaldi’s setting of the 127th Psalm, “Nisi Dominus,” featured soprano Maria Ferrante, together with Tenenbaum, playing an impressive viola d’amore, a kind of viola on steroids with six or seven strings backed by six or seven more strings for sympathetic resonance. It’s about the largest string instrument that can still be tucked under a human chin and requires an almost elastic arm length to finger. It seemed there was a splendid blend between Ferrante’s singing and Tenenbaum’s playing: supple, reverential and enormously moving and powerful — in the words of the psalm itself, “arrows in the hand of the mighty.” Gorgeous and transcendent Vivaldi.

The next offering featured Tenenbaum playing the Concerto in D Minor for Viola D’amore, RV 395. She achieved a mesmerizing melodic line in the second movement Largo, and in the concluding movement a dizzying, sparkling cadenza that may or may not have been her own. Local cellist Tom Keil pronounced her work “absolutely astounding.”

WCMS’ whole ensemble returned for the final piece, Vivaldi’s Concerto for Two Violins, from “L’Estro Armonico,” RV 522, including Carolyn Fryer on bass, Amy Rawston and Jorge Soto on violins and Mark Berger on viola. Sulski and Tenenbaum handled the solo violin work, and their spritely delivery seemed an exclamation point to the evening’s terrific music-making. The audience’s standing ovation signaled how fortunate Worcester is to have WCMS plugged in to the concert season.